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Marcia Robinson's Life Of Dance, Community And Katherine Dunham's Influence At West Las Vegas Arts Center

WEST LAS VEGAS, Nevada — Marcia R. Robinson is always near and is dear in the hearts of many in this corner of the world. Her life has paralleled the history as Las Vegas and in that same history has parallel and current experiences. To say and identify West Las Vegas is to say and identify Marcia Robinson. She is extolling the dynamics of place, people, time and currency. (Photo: *Marcia Robinson shares memories, including her time with Katherine Dunham, during a recent performance at the West Las Vegas Arts Center.*)



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West Las Vegas means predominantly African American and historic West Las Vegas includes the times I worked together — some in restricted positions — and sent their children to school together lived apart until Such a rule remains tantamount in telling the story of the American experience of this community which still frequent the social scene here and overnight places to stay.

In those days, especially during the short-lived existence of the Moulin Rouge, Sammy Davis Jr. and Rat Pack members Peter Lawford could be found after hours in West Las Vegas entertaining and being entertained. This everlasting affinity for Pearl Bailey, Ella Fitzgerald and Nat King Cole, among others.

In this milieu, Marcia Robinson has an unflappable ease that comes with being centered in Buddhist teachings in the story of Las Vegas and West Las Vegas since she came here as a dancer in choreographer Donn Arden's Hollywood!

That show opened at the MGM Grand Hotel on the big stage in the Ziegfeld Room in April 1974.

Robinson had graduated from the University of California, San Diego and then earned a Master of Fine Art degree before coming here to play here craft.

She grew up in East St. Louis, Illinois, where she learned dance under the tutelage of Katherine Dunham, choreographer and social activist, at Dunham's Performing Arts Training Center on the branch campus of Southern Illinois University in East St. Louis.

"Dance gave me direction," Robinson says in a sound studio here in the arts center. "I always enjoyed black and white movies like 'Carmen Jones' and 'The Sky' and the movies that Shirley Temple danced in. Miss Dunham was like an answered prayer. She really believed in respect for life and the need for education."

Indeed, Dunham, viewing the dance scene on YouTube from the 1943 film "Stormy Weather," gives a glimpse of the eye of the beholder.

Dunham had earned a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Chicago and later received a Master's degree from the University of Southern California. She studied African dance in the Caribbean for two years as a budding anthropologist and Africa became the hallmark of a long and distinguished career.

"Katherine Dunham is my mentor," Robinson says of the choreographer and dancer who passed away on May 29, 2006, shy of her 97th birthday. "Everybody who goes through this life needs a mentor. When I met her, I was young and she was old. I thought that place was the world."

"Then I became involved in after-school drama, played basketball, and played saxophone in the band at (defunct) Roosevelt High School. My mother kept me busy," she says. "Miss Dunham always believed in outreach."

When you survey the life of Dunham, Robinson's life of commitment to dance, academics and activism in the community, it's clear that she was influenced by her mentor and dance instructor. Hence forward, in this story about her, if Robinson is bringing to fruition a new career, it's likely she's channeling Katherine Dunham. Examining separate photos of Dunham and Robinson, there are striking similarities in their appearance.

At this point, the interviewer pores through Robinson's photo albums and publicity stills that capture a life



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As an aside, for two different stints in a nomadic life, residence was taken up here in the valley. The coordinator at the book superstore provided contact with and the chance to work with many people in bookstore was a community gathering place. A key part of the marketing strategy was to provide meeting c charge to groups or individuals who in turn would become valued customers.

That was back in 1997, when friends for life began with Marcia Robinson. Truth be told, Marcia Robinso requests. However, for "On the Road: People Bridges to People," the first nationwide project of Ameri reluctantly sat for an interview and braved a photo shoot.

One of the organizations that we at the bookstore developed a strong working relationship with in the c Vegas Arts Center. Hired by the city in November 1994, Robinson has been director at the arts center sir 1995. It is a major role in a life that emulates Katherine Dunham.

The need for an arts center came after rioting erupted in Las Vegas following the Rodney King verdict in recall "West Las Vegas suffered \$6 million in damages, \$3.5 million of it to Nucleus Plaza."

"The elders of the community came together and said something needed to be done to help our young peop together a list of what was needed in the community and a cultural arts center was at the top of that list. I appointed to lead the center.

"Councilman Frank Hawkins is the one who pushed it," she says. "Jan Jones was mayor at the time."

The West Las Vegas Arts Center began offering classes to kids five years and up and began with an Africa Dunham, for seniors. Robinson taught youth classes until a full roster of dance instructors was recruited.

"What we concentrate on is our youth development," Robinson says. "The Westside historically has had high There was a lot of discontentment. People here thought there was a lack of municipal government support ; needed in the education system. The area had high crime rates and was experiencing gang activity.

"I was very familiar with this area of the city and knew we had to do something to control the negative ener that negative energy."

The Performing and Visual Arts Summer Camp for Kids began in 1996, starting each morning at 7:30 and wi in jail fees that were designated to underserved communities covered costs of operating the camp that first s

Among dance and theater activities, students learned sounds of a steel drum ensemble — a staple of C testament to Katherine Dunham's influence.

"It raised their self-esteem," Robinson recalls. "It was a true arts conservatory. Since then, the summer arts weeks, to six week and now it is eight weeks. We need the time to take them through the entire process. Thi We teach skills with discipline and understanding the world around you."

In recent years, the end of summer camp production was performed on stage at the House of Blues in th Casino.

Yearly, Kwanzaa and the seven African harvest and community principles developed by Dr. Maulana Kareng



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Mario Lorne Smith Jr. also known as "MINX."

Ongoing rites of passage programs are held separately for boys and girls. Motivation programs that incl evolved as unique offerings at the arts center.

"We bring in elders to talk to our young people," Robinson says. "These are elders, some of whom have gone synergy among elders and youth. In the evening, after we have gone through a day of meetings, we always did we do today? What did you learn? What would you like to articulate?"

"Most of the kids will say 'I have had a great morning. I am ready to work.' And they will name for themselves on themselves. We give them autonomy to be their best selves. Our mission is to bring out the best in you so your best.



Mario Lorne Smith Jr., a Bahamian and Dutch artist, also known as "MINX," created facial painting of President Obama on display at the West Las Vegas Arts Center.

"That's what is unique about us," she says. "You can't find what we do here at the West Las Vegas Arts Center Nevada. We expect a lot from our young people. We sign a contract with them to hold each other account accountable, and living up to your expectations."

What future programming would Robinson, who in recent years earned a doctorate in education degree frc Las Vegas, like to see for the community?

"It would have to be intergenerational," she says. "It has to have the elders, but it has to have the young people. Elders have to give back. Our youth go through different stages of life. They will become the elders and will I has to be part of the process. We have a responsibility to each other."

"We here at the West Las Vegas Arts Center help with that process in our young people. It's a continuous African tradition of village elders inculcating the youngest generation."

By Albert C. Jones, America, The Diversity Place



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